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ABSTRACT

A follow-up study was conducted of graduates from the Ohio State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture with a major in agricultural communications. The sample consisted of 68 graduates who completed an instrument that used Likert-type scaling. Procedures recommended by Miller and Smith were used to handle problems associated with nonresponse error; comparison of early and late respondents indicated that nonrespondents were similar to respondents. Results showed that the graduates tended to be white females whose highest academic degree was a bachelor's. More than half earned under $25,000 annually. Business and marketing, public relations, and writing and editing were major areas of employment. Graduates were very satisfied with their undergraduate courses in agriculture, journalism, and communications and less satisfied with their basic education requirement courses. They perceived courses in journalism and communications to be more important than agricultural or basic education courses. In addition, they tended to be satisfied with selected undergraduate experiences and perceived them to be extremely important for future agricultural communicators. Recommendations included recruitment of male and minority students and use of findings by faculty and administrators to advise students and focus on the importance graduates placed on cocurricular activities. (YLB)

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Summary of
Research

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A PROFILE OF AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS GRADUATES OF THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Blannie E. Bowen and Barbara E. Cooper

Agricultural communications became a major at Ohio State University in 1969. From its origin until 1984, the major was administered through the College of Agriculture rather than through an academic department. In 1984, academic and administrative responsibility for the major was shifted from the College of Agriculture to the Department of Agricultural Education. Because the major has no graduate component and few faculty are involved in administering the major, limited research has been conducted about agricultural communications as an area of academic study. No research was located that focused on agricultural communications graduates of Ohio State. Nationally, few studies have been conducted relative to agricultural communications as a field of study. Because of this void, this study was conducted to develop a profile of individuals who have received undergraduate degrees in agriculture from Ohio State with a major in agricultural communications.

Related Literature

From their beginnings in the United States, farm journals traditionally employed "agricultural journalists" whose qualifications were: born and raised on a farm and possess a "flair for writing" (Duncan, 1957). The preparation of agricultural journalists was not a major concern of educators and employers until the 1950s.

In Mitchell's 1956 nationwide survey of employers, the lack of agreement about the academic preparation an individual needed to become an agricultural communicator was apparent. In this survey, 38% of the respondents said they preferred to employ individuals with training in agricultural journalism if it were possible for them to get it (Mitchell, 1956). However, almost as many (34%) said an agricultural degree was desirable for training employees, while 19% said an agricultural degree was a "must" for hiring an agricultural journalist (Mitchell,1956). Mitchell's 1956 study also revealed that 42% of the employers expected employees to have a farm background.

About the same time, Duncan (1957) surveyed 200 agricultural communicators to determine courses they would recommend for agricultural journalists.

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More than half recommended specific courses in agriculture.

The qualifications needed to become an agricultural communicator have evolved as technology and job requirements changed. Thirty years ago, farmers were still the primary audience of agricultural communicators. Now, agricultural communicators are trying to reach urban audiences, consumers, and the business world.

These changes were reflected in a 1972 study by Evans. Agriculturalists have identified communication as a matter of utmost importance to agriculture (Evans, 1972). A 1973 survey of 1,105 agricultural communicators gave nearly unanimous support to the importance of communications skills and human relations in the agricultural communications curriculum (Kroupa and Evans, 1973).

While respondents to Duncan's 1957 survey recommended specific agricultural course work for the aspiring agricultural communicator, respondents to the Kroupa and Evans survey recommended specific journalism and communications courses they considered critically important (1976). Further, Evans proposed a curriculum in which future communicators study the "macro" dimension of communications; that is, communication systems, processes, and performance as they relate to agriculture (1972). The curriculum Evans proposed was corroborated by a 1974 survey of practicing agricultural communicators. Kern and Kelly (1974) found that a high number of agricultural communicators were seeking new communications skills or knowledge through short courses, night classes, or other forms of training.

The thinking about the academic preparation for agricultural communicators has changed, and, so too, have the university curricula in agricultural communications or agricultural journalism. Evans and Bolick (1982) compared agricultural journalism curricula of 1981 with those of the 1950s. They found that the 1981 programs were much more communications-oriented (Evans & Bolick, 1982). Further, the 1981 curricula included courses in which students apply communications skills in agricultural settings. Regarding agricultural course work, Evans and Bolick found that 1981 curricula tended to be much more flexible than earlier programs.

It is apparent that the academic preparation of agricultural communicators has been evolutionary. Bolick and Evans' study documented changes in university curricula. The Kroupa and Evans' study of perceptions held by agricultural communicators offers additional support for the evolutionary nature of agricultural communications curricula. No study was located, however, that focused upon the agricultural communications major at Ohio State University or its graduates. Consequently, this study was designed to add to a limited knowledge base about agricultural communications academic programs. Examined in this study are perceptions agricultural communications graduates of Ohio State have relative to the curricula they followed and the type of curriculum future agricultural communicators should experience.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The primary purpose of this investigation was to do a follow-up study of students who graduated from The Ohio State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture with a major in agricultural communications. Specific objectives included to:

1. determine selected demographic characteristics of the graduates.

2. assess the graduates' level of satisfaction regarding their undergraduate courses and selected academic experiences.

3. assess the graduates' perceptions of courses and academic experiences undergraduates need to be successful agricultural communicators.

Methods and Procedures

A review of agricultural communications literature failed to detect an instrument suitable for collecting the data needed for the study. Thus, the researchers developed such an instrument. Likert-type scaling was used to assess the graduates' satisfaction with undergraduate courses they took in agriculture, communications, journalism, and basic education. Also listed on the instrument were academic experiences commonly associated with a major in agricultural communications. Graduates rated their satisfaction with the courses and experiences using a scale where 1=very unsatisfied, 2=unsatisfied, 3=satisfied, and 4=very satisfied. A 4-point scale was also listed on the instrument to assess the graduates' perceptions of the importance of the same courses and experiences for future agriculture communicators.

To establish the content validity of the instrument, a panel of faculty and graduate students at Ohio State who had professional experiences in some phase of agricultural communications reviewed the instrument. Seven undergraduate students majoring in agricultural communications then completed the instrument to detect problems related to wording, clarity, and format.

The population for the study included 131 graduates identified by Ohio State College of Agriculture and Department of Agricultural Education records as being agricultural communications majors. Because the population was small, a census was taken. All graduates were mailed a copy of a cover letter, the data collection instrument, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope on November 25, 1987. They were asked to return the instrument within two weeks. By December 18, 46 had returned the instrument. Individuals not responding were sent a follow-up letter and another copy of the instrument. By January 9, 1988, 22 additional graduates had returned the instrument.

During the data collection period, 11 instruments could not be delivered because of bad addresses. One individual returned the instrument uncompleted and indicated that she was not an agricultural communications major. Thus, the accessible population included 119 graduates which translates into a 57.1% response rate (68 of 119 accessible graduates).

Because all graduates did not return the instrument, the authors employed procedures recommended by Miller and Smith (1983) to handle problems associated with non-response error. Graduates who responded the first three weeks (46) were compared with those responding the last three weeks (22). After comparing early and late respondents, the authors concluded that the non-respondents were similar to the respondents. The groups were not significantly different ($p > .05$) in terms of annual salary, highest degree attained, marital status, gender, Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) student organization membership, whether a College of Agriculture magazine staff member, and job satisfaction. Older graduates did, however, tend to respond faster than younger graduates ($p < .05$).

Findings

The findings will be presented to correspond to the objectives formulated for the study.

Demographic Characteristics

As shown in Table 1, almost two-thirds of the graduates completed their degrees after 1978. Twenty-two students graduated between 1984-87. This compares with 12 students who graduated during the first five years the major was offered (1969-73). Data presented in Table 1 reveal an upward trend in the number of students completing degrees in agricultural communications.

Forty-one percent of the graduates are in the 30-39 age category and a third in the 25-29 category (Table 2). All respondents are white, and 70% are females. Also shown is that 61% are married, and 91% have a bachelor's as their highest academic degree.

As shown in Table 3, 22% of the graduates earned less than $15,000 per year. An additional 17% earned salaries in the $15,000 - $19,999 category while another 17% were in the $20,000 - $24,999 category.

Table 1
Year of Graduation for Agricultural Communications Graduates

Category	n	%
1969 - 73	12	18
1974 - 78	13	19
1979 - 83	21	31
1984 - 87	22	32
Total	68	100

Table 2
Selected Demographic Characteristics of Agricultural Communications Graduates

Category	n	%
Age		
Under 25	12	18
25 - 29	23	34
30 - 39	28	41
40 - 49	5	7
Total	68	100
Gender		
Female	47	70
Male	20	30
Total	67	100
Race		
White	68	100
Marital Status		
Married	41	61
Single	26	39
Total	67	100
Highest Degree		
Bachelor's	62	91
Master's	6	9
Total	68	100

Thirteen percent of the graduates earned $50,000 or more per year.

As shown in Table 4, 22% of the graduates held positions classified as business-marketing. Another 22% held public relations positions and 19% were in writing-editing positions. Also shown is that the remaining third of the graduates held a variety of positions, including positions not in agricultural communications.

Table 3
Annual Salaries for Agricultural Communications Graduates

Category	n	%
Under $15,000	14	22
$15,000 - $19,999	11	17
$20,000 - $24,999	11	17
$25,000 - $29,999	8	13
$30,000 - $34,999	5	8
$35,000 - $39,999	2	3
$40,000 - $44,999	3	5
$45,000 - $49,999	1	2
$50,000 or more	8	1
Total	63	100

Table 4
Employment Areas for Agricultural Communications Graduates

Category	n	%
Broadcaster	3	5
Business-Marketing	13	22
Cooperative	2	3
Education	4	7
Free Lancer	2	3
Government	4	8
Public Relations	13	22
Self-Employed	2	3
Univ. Ext. Comm.	2	3
Writer-Editor	11	19
Other	3	5
Total	59	100

Curriculum Satisfaction and Importance

The graduates were asked how satisfied they are with their undergraduate courses and selected academic experiences. They were also asked how important such courses and experiences are for undergraduates preparing to become agricultural communicators. A scale of 1=very unsatisfied, 2=unsatisfied, 3=satisfied, and 4=very satisfied allowed graduates to provide satisfaction ratings for their agriculture, journalism/communications, and basic education courses as well as selected undergraduate experiences. For the importance ratings, a scale of 1=very unimportant, 2=unimportant, 3=important, and 4=very important was provided. The satisfaction and importance ratings are presented in Tables 5-8.

As shown in Table 5, 62 students had taken courses in agricultural economics, 61 in animal science, and 54 in agronomy. Forty nine of the graduates had taken courses in agricultural communications. All courses shown in Table 5 received ratings 3.00 or higher which indicates that the graduates were satisfied with their courses in agriculture. In terms of importance of such courses for future agricultural communicators, mean ratings ranged from 2.61 for poultry science courses to 3.75 for agricultural communications courses. Courses in agricultural economics, animal science, and food science also received mean importance ratings over 3.00.

Data presented in Table 6 show the graduates were satisfied with all of their courses in journalism and communications. Mean satisfaction ratings ranged from 3.29 for editing courses to 3.47 for broadcasting courses. However, only 19 students had taken courses in broadcasting, and 28 had taken courses in advertising. In terms of importance of courses for future agricultural communicators, mean scores ranged from 3.33 for broadcast courses to 3.91 for writing courses. Editing and public relations were the next highest rated course areas.

Table 5

Graduates' Satisfaction with Their Undergraduate Agriculture Courses and the Importance They Placed on Such Courses for Future Agricultural Communicators

	Satisfaction			Importance		
Course Area	n	Mean*	SD	n	Mean**	SD
Agri. Communications	49	3.16	.69	60	3.75	.47
Agri. Economics	62	3.50	.57	63	3.52	.56
Agri. Education	40	3.45	.50	59	2.92	.75
Agri. Engineering	14	3.43	.51	56	2.63	.84
Agronomy	54	3.19	.68	64	2.92	.72
Animal Science	61	3.43	.53	63	3.14	.59
Dairy Science	19	3.79	.42	58	2.84	.59
Food Science	26	3.50	.71	60	3.22	.61
Horticulture	33	3.42	.66	62	2.87	.65
Natural Resources	14	3.07	.47	62	2.97	.65
Plant Pathology	6	3.50	.55	59	2.69	.70
Poultry Science	7	3.14	.90	56	2.61	.73

* - Means based on scale of 1=very unsatisfied; 4=very satisfied.
** - Means based on scale of 1=very unimportant; 4=very important.

Table 6

Graduates' Satisfaction with Their Undergraduate Journalism and Communications Courses and the Importance They Placed on Such Courses for Future Agricultural Communicators

	Satisfaction			Importance		
Course Area	n	Mean*	SD	n	Mean**	SD
Advertising	28	3.32	.82	62	3.52	.67
Broadcasting	19	3.47	.70	61	3.33	.63
Editing	59	3.29	.64	64	3.83	.38
Photography	54	3.39	.76	64	3.50	.56
Public Relations	60	3.38	.74	62	3.77	.42
Writing	65	3.38	.74	64	3.91	.29

* - Means based on scale of 1=very unsatisfied; 4=very satisfied.
** - Means based on scale of 1=very unimportant; 4=very important.

As shown in Table 7, graduates rated social studies (3.27) and natural science courses (3.20) as their most satisfying basic education requirements. Humanities courses were rated least satisfying. In terms of basic education requirements for future agricultural communicators, graduates perceived foreign language courses to be least important. Business and economics courses were perceived as most important.

As shown in Table 8, the graduates were satisfied with selected academic experiences. Most satisfying were experiences involving the College of Agriculture student magazine, advising and counseling, and the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow student organization. The graduates rated their overall undergraduate experience as satisfactory (3.30 on a 4.00 scale). Internships, career exposure, and advising and

Table 7

Graduates' Satisfaction with Their Basic Education Requirements and the Importance They Place on Such Courses for Future Agricultural Communicators

Basic Education Requirements (BERs)	Satisfaction n	Satisfaction Mean*	Satisfaction SD	Importance n	Importance Mean**	Importance SD
Old BER Course Areas						
Computers	45	2.47	1.01	-	-	-
English/Communications	64	2.36	.60	-	-	-
Humanities	65	2.14	.60	-	-	-
Mathematics	65	2.75	.88	-	-	-
Natural Sciences	65	3.20	.64	-	-	-
Social Studies	63	3.27	.57	-	-	-
Proposed BER Course Areas						
Business & Economics	-	-	-	64	3.77	.42
Computing	-	-	-	64	3.52	.59
Foreign Languages	-	-	-	64	2.58	.71
Government	-	-	-	64	3.41	.53
International Affairs	-	-	-	62	3.24	.69
Political Science	-	-	-	62	3.10	.59

* - Means based on scale of 1=very unsatisfied; 4=very satisfied.
** - Means based on scale of 1=very unimportant; 4=very important.

Table 8

Graduates' Satisfaction with Their Other Undergraduate Academic Experiences and the Importance They Placed on Those Experiences for Future Agricultural Communicators

	Satisfaction			Importance		
Activity/Experience	n	Mean*	SD	n	Mean**	SD
Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow Student Organization	49	3.08	.76	59	3.31	.62
Advising & Counseling	63	3.27	.85	65	3.66	.48
College of Agriculture Student Magazine	57	3.32	.63	62	3.45	.62
Career Exposure	61	2.93	.93	64	3.77	.43
Internships	47	2.94	.96	64	3.81	.39
Placement	57	2.74	1.03	64	3.66	.51
Overall Undergrad. Experience	63	3.30	.61	—	—	—

* - Means based on scale of 1=very unsatisfied; 4=very satisfied.
** - Means based on scale of 1=very unimportant; 4=very important.

counseling were academic experiences rated most important for future agricultural communicators.

Data presented in Table 9 indicate that 65% of the graduates were members of the Ohio State Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) student organization. Also shown is that 24% were officers of the OSU ACT chapter. Slightly over 9% of the graduates were national ACT officers.

Data presented in Table 10 indicate that 71% of the graduates had been members of the College of Agriculture student magazine. Slightly over half of the graduates had also held editorial positions on the magazine.

Table 9

Agricultural Communications Graduates Who Were ACT Members, Officers of the OSU ACT Chapter, or National ACT Officers

Group	n	%
ACT Member?		
Yes	42	65
No	23	35
Total	65	100
An OSU ACT Officer?		
Yes	15	24
No	48	76
Total	63	100
A National ACT Officer?		
Yes	6	9
No	58	91
Total	64	100

Table 10
Agricultural Communications Graduates Who Were Members of the College of Agriculture Magazine Staff and Graduates Who Held Editorial Positions

Category	n	%
A Staff Member?		
Yes	46	71
No	19	29
Total	65	100
Member of Editorial Staff?		
Yes	34	53
No	30	47
Total	64	100

Conclusions

The following conclusions are made based upon the data collected through this study.

1. Agricultural communications graduates of Ohio State tend to be white females who have a bachelor's as their highest academic degree.

2. More than half of the agricultural communications graduates earn annual salaries under $25,000.

3. Business and marketing, public relations, and writing and editing are major areas of employment for agricultural communications graduates.

4. Agricultural communications graduates are very satisfied with their undergraduate courses in agriculture, journalism, and communications and less satisfied with their basic education requirement courses.

5. In terms of courses for future agricultural communicators, the graduates perceive courses in journalism and communications to be more important than agriculture or basic education courses.

6. The graduates tended to be satisfied with selected undergraduate experiences and perceive such experiences to be extremely important for future agricultural communicators.

7. The findings of this study parallel those cited in the literature about 1980s agricultural communications curricula focusing on communications preparation more so than courses in agriculture.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are presented based upon the findings of the study.

1. The College of Agriculture and agricultural communications faculty should intensify efforts to recruit male and minority students.

2. Agricultural communications faculty should study positions held by the graduates and salaries earned by professional agricultural communicators to better advise students.

3. Faculty in agricultural communications should discuss the findings of this study with their advisees to help them understand the importance agricultural communicators place on communications, agriculture, and basic education courses.

4. Agricultural communications faculty should implement strategies that enable undergraduates to develop a stronger appreciation for the role that basic education courses, including international experiences and foreign languages, have in the curriculum.

5. Appropriate administrators and agricultural communications faculty should review the findings of this study relative to the importance agricultural communicators place upon co-curricular activities.

6. Agricultural communications faculty at other universities should conduct similar studies to determine if Ohio State graduates are typical of agricultural communications professionals in their states.

7. This study should be replicated in 10 years to determine if similar findings will result.

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SUMMARY OF RESEARCH SERIES

Nationally, few studies have been conducted relative to agricultural communications as a field of study. Because of this void, this study was conducted to describe the characteristics of agricultural communications' graduates, determine their level of satisfaction with undergraduate courses, and assess their perceptions of needed courses and academic experiences. It should be of interest to agricultural education and agricultural communications faculty.

This summary is based on a follow-up study of agricultural communications students who graduated from The Ohio State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture with a major in agricultural communications. Drs. Blannie E. Bowen and Barbara E. Cooper were faculty in the Department of Agricultural Education. Bowen is now Rumberger Professor of Agriculture, The Pennsylvania State University. Cooper is now involved in free lance editing in Lafayette, Indiana. Special appreciation is due to Kirk Heinze, Michigan State University; Richard L. Lee, University of Missouri-Columbia; and Joel H. Magisos, The Ohio State University for their critical review of the manuscript prior to publication.

Research has been an important function of the Department of Agricultural Education since it was established in 1917. Research conducted by the Department has generally been in the form of graduate theses, staff studies, and funded research. It is the purpose of this series to make useful knowledge from such research available to practitioners in the profession. Individuals desiring additional information on this topic should examine the references cited.

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